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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether the impact of television advertising on black children is significantly different from its impact on white children, and if the impact is good or bad in terms of psychological and social development. Following an extensive review of the literature on this subject, an exploratory survey was conducted. Respondents for the survey were 65 black mothers in the Dallas, Texas area. The results of this exploratory research reveal that black mothers do not feel remarkably different about television advertising than white mothers. The black mothers do feel that their children understand advertising to some extent and that advertising does influence the children to ask for the things they see advertised. (RB)

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CHILDREN'S TV COMMERCIALS: IMPORTANCE OF THE RACE FACTOR

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of television on the lives of children has been described in different ways. A 1975 public television special stated that by the time a child reaches the age of 18 he or she has viewed television for 15,000 hours and has spent 11,000 hours in school. Another source stated that by the time children are 5 they have watched television enough to earn a BA degree (Cohen, 1974). Liebert and Poulos (1972) commented that television has two of the characteristics of religion: it is the opiate of the masses and it inspires truth, goodness and beauth or mendacity, visciousness and evil. The entire question of the impact of TV violence on children is being furiously debated at the present (TV GUIDE, 1975).

Today television is a pervasive force in society and there is concern about its impact on children. Recently television advertising targeted toward children has become an important issue among business, government and consumer representatives. On the negative side it is contended that television advertising makes children always want what they see, presents false claims, presents products to children which do not meet their expectations, is silly, stupid and scary and instills desires in children that they do not need and/or cannot afford. On the positive side advertising provides product information, creates awareness and knowledge, provides useful information and is educational and entertaining for children.

The issues are complex. In terms of consumer socialization, Ward (1974) states the issues as: 1) the process by which children acquire consumer skills, knowledge and attitudes; 2) the content of these socialization processes; and 3) how early learning influences later cognitions and behavior related to consumption. Robertson and Rossiter (1974) have looked into Heider's "naive psychology" to determine if attribution theory can aid in explaining how children assimilate commercial messages from television. To be sure, there is little agreement among those involved. Recently Pierce, Hooper and Culley (1975)

illustrated that there are definite differences in attitudes among the general public, advertisers, advertising agencies, government agencies and Action for Children's Television (ACT) representatives.

Virtually all of the recent research in this arena has focused on white children as opposed to minorities. For reasons that will become evident as this paper progresses, it is important that the minority community is researched to see if the impact of television advertising on minority children is different from that of whites. Because of the number of minorities (particularly blacks) it is important that researchers determine if the impact of television advertising on black children is significantly different from that of white children and, in either case, if the impact is good or bad in terms of psychological and social development. This paper focuses on four areas: some research findings on the development of minority children; research findings about minority children and advertising; results of an exploratory study which investigated the attitudes of black mothers regarding advertising to their children; and the future research needs which must be met if progress is to be made.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MINORITY CHILDREN: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

Stinnett, Talley, and Walters (1973) studied the perceptions of black and white high school students about relationships with their parents. The study revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups. The results suggest that the black families studied seemed to be more mother-centered. In addition, the black students seemed to have closer relationships with their parents than the white students. The authors concluded that the tendency to concentrate on the lack of cohesiveness in black families by using demographic statistics exclusively may be misleading.

Katz (1964) suggested that school desegregation involves both "social threat" and "social facilitation." Katz believes that friendliness by the white majority of a school could be helpful to incoming black students. Acceptance by the white majority might reduce social threat and increase the black student's self-confidence. Acceptance by achievement-oriented classmates might increase their influence as role models and lead the black students to become more achievement-motivated (Kelley, 1952; Merton, 1957).

Lewis and St. John (1974) found in their study of friendships between races and school achievement that black students received higher grades if they were also popular with white classmates. The investigators posited three explanations for this result:

1. Children may imitate the model of academically successful classmates.
2. Children may actually learn academic skills and behavior from their successful classmates. In this case, popularity of the student did not seem to affect test-taking skills.
3. Teachers may perceive that popular children deserve good grades.

The language development of black ghetto children has been considered from two viewpoints. Many contend that the language development of ghetto children is simply different (Labov, 1966; Stewart, 1965). They attribute the difference to its origin in a different community where social status, race, and values differ from the white middle-class. Others contend that the black ghetto dialect may be attributed to the lack of a systematized language (Bernstein, 1966) as a result of genetic inferiority (Jensen, 1969).

A study by Genshaft and Hirt (1974) concerning the language differences in black and white children found black students to be bilingual, thus supporting the difference theory in language development. They reported that when social class and intelligence are controlled, black children perform as well on standard English as black dialect tests. Additionally, white children were found to

perform significantly poorer on the black dialect test. The investigators further concluded that if black children are really bilingual, assessing their cognitive ability by using standard English sentences presents a bias.

A study by Neely, Heckel, and Leichtman (1973) concerning imitative behavior in black and white children found increased imitation of the white model by black children. This was surprising to the experimenters in light of recent increases in racial solidarity in the black community. The result was somewhat explained however, by the lower-class background of the particular students. In particular these students were raised in a more traditional Southern Negro ghetto by less educated parents, probably less acquainted with recent philosophic changes in black identities.

Recently (Williams, 1974) a study was conducted comparing performances by black children on the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts and a similar version using nonstandard English dialect. The researchers found that the black children taking the nonstandard version, with instructions and concepts translated into the black dialect, scored significantly higher than the matched group taking the standard version.

Studies by Williams and Stabler (1973) show that children develop a tendency toward evaluating the concept white positively and black negatively, even prior to kindergarten. Blacks and whites both show this although the blacks associated white with good and black with bad less consistently. Research studies show some correlation between children's attitudes toward the colors white and black and their attitudes toward themselves and other people.

In regard to language development, two divergent schools of thought exist. The nativists, of whom Lenneberg (1967) is one, theorize that language development is a function of maturational causes. In this theory, language cannot begin to develop until a child has reached a given level of physical maturation. Thus, language development in children is assumed not to require special training.

The environmentalists, on the other hand, have developed an imitation-reinforcement model of language development. This group assumes that environmental factors exert the major influence on language development. Both groups, however, agree that language is acquired through social interaction (Osser, 1973).

Most early studies suggest that blacks and other deprived groups acquire lower self-concepts at a young age and this tends to be pervasive through their lives. Greenberg (1972) reported that the black children he surveyed in grades three through seven had more negative self-concepts than their white counterparts. It was also found however, that by ninth grade this relationship was reversed. Black ninth graders, in contrast to their white peers, had more positive self-perceptions. Hulbary (1975) likewise found in his study concerning race and deprivation effects on self-concepts, that there was no evidence of the self-rejection found in young blacks in studies of previous years. On the contrary, he found black adolescents to hold high self-perceptions with great pride and self-respect. Research indicates that black and white children become aware of racial differences as early as three or four and simultaneously gain the understanding of values placed on certain colors by their society (Proshansky and Newton, 1968).

These studies indicate that advertising messages to black children (and probably other minorities as well) can have impact in terms of role expectations, role modeling, how mother and father are pictured in the advertising, the relationship between white and black children in the advertising, language barriers, self-concepts and the like. Imitative behavior may be strong and as a result it behooves the advertiser whose messages will be received by minority children to proceed with extreme caution since the emotions and realities of these children may be affected.

MINORITY CHILDREN AND ADVERTISING: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

Unlike the previous topic, research in the area of advertising to minority children is virtually nonexistent. Very few research studies have focused specifically upon advertising to minority children. The importance of this topic is stated by Ward (1974) when he points out that the greater an understanding there is of the role of advertising in the consumer socialization process, the more this can aid in developing educational programs and understanding what occurs in low-income subcultures. Ward points out that as an example from learning theory one might argue that low income children (a good proportion of whom are minorities) with less money may be less aware of available goods and less adequate in terms of consumer skills while on the other hand one could argue that because they have less money, low income children are more aware of products and have more highly developed consumer skills so that they can more effectively use their scarce resource. What is advertising's impact in this socialization process?

Barry and Hansen (1973) reported findings of a research study which dealt specifically with advertising and minority children. Two hypotheses were investigated: racial differences do not affect advertising recall of children, and racial differences do not affect advertising preferences of children. The approach used 30 segregated white and 30 segregated black second graders from comparable income families. Each class of students was shown two out-of-cycle cereal commercials and administered a 12-item questionnaire. Nine of the questions measured recall ability while three were preference measures. Through chi-square analysis, the study found that while there is generally no significant difference between white and black second graders and their recall ability there is a significant difference between them (.01 level) in terms of preference for the commercial, actors in the commercial and brand of cereal. While the black

children overwhelmingly preferred one specific ad, cereal brand and actor within the commerical, the white children were split almost equally among the three items. The only recall difficulty that the black children faced was linking specific brand characters (an Indian and Tony the Tiger) with the correct brand. That is, for only 2 of the 9 recall questions, there was a significant difference in correct responses and these both dealt with brand identification. The significance of this study was that there are preference differences between black and white children and these could be due to the race of the actors in the commercial.

In another study, Hendon (1973) sought to determine the "lowest common denominator" of children's advertising. That is, he wanted to discover if television advertising to children was simple or complex. In his study he compared recall and degree of insistence responses between normal IQ (NIQ) black and white children and educable mentally retarded (EMR) black and white children, all ranging from ages six to twelve. Hendon's approach used 45 EMR's and 49 NIQ's from the same two schools. He showed the groups five of the most advertised cereal commercials on the three major networks. The overall findings of his study indicated that there were no significant differences in either recall ability or degree of insistence between NIQ's and EMR's. Hendon did find that NIQ whites scored higher on recall ability than NIQ blacks but that EMR whites scored approximately the same as EMR blacks. Hendon also found that as age increased, recall ability increased and degree of insistence for the products advertised decreased.

Appleton and Barrett (1973) studied 126 black and white 2nd, 4th and 6th grade school children in segregated classrooms. Each class was shown two 30 second ice cream commercials. Eight recall and two preference questions were tested with a questionnaire. The researchers found no significant difference in recall between black and white children based on race. They did find

a significant difference in recall for whites based on age but that difference did not hold true for the blacks in their study.

Williams (1969) did not look specifically at TV advertising but his study dealt with the social class differences in how children talk about television. Williams contends that language distinctions in social structures of lower socio-economic classes are a key agent in the socialization of children. Studies show little significant effect of TV on language development of lower class children and there may be a vicious cycle operating in that language style serves as a barrier to higher levels of verbal experiences from TV. Williams is also concerned about the relevance to minorities of white, middle class standard English.

What these few studies illustrate is that television in general and television advertising in particular provide mixed results when minority children are researched. Where recall ability is different in one study it is not in another. Where preference is different in one, it is not in another. There are no firm conclusions about the impact of television advertising on children. This is not, however, unique from what we know about the impact of television advertising on adults.

ATTITUDES OF MINORITY MOTHERS TOWARD TELEVISION ADVERTISING

In June, 1975 the author conducted a research survey and a questionnaire was personally administered to 65 black mothers in the Dallas, Texas area. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit attitudinal data from these mothers regarding their perceptions of TV advertising to children. The research was exploratory in nature and, as most exploratory research, presents potential research hypotheses rather than answers to previously developed hypotheses.

The respondents had an average of 2.8 children, whose average age was 6.1 years and average year in school was 2.1. Most of the respondents had secretarial/clerical jobs and their husbands were blue collar laborers. The

average number of years of school completed for the respondents was 13.3 (first year college) and the approximate household income was $10,800. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents had husbands living with them while 30 percent were widowed or divorced. Respondents indicated that their children watched television on the average of 4.2 hours per day. The results of the survey follow.

Can your children tell the difference between TV programs and TV commercials (advertising)? How do you know?

Ninety percent of the respondents felt that their children can tell the difference between television programs and commercials. There were three basic reasons: 1) they have certain programs they prefer to watch, 2) the length of time in which they watch certain programs, and 3) the attentiveness that is paid to short quick commercials. As a child grows older TV programs take on a strong preference over TV commercials. Seven percent of the respondents felt that their children cannot tell the difference between TV programs and commercials, the reason being age (less than 2 years).

Do you have any worries about television advertising which is aimed at children? Why or why not?

About seventy percent of the respondents had no major concerns about children TV commercials. The major reason was that they saw no harmful effects coming from the advertising. Some of the respondents revealed that their major concerns about childrens TV advertising have centered around: 1) emphasis on toys; 2) fear that the products advertised on TV are out of the price range they will be able to afford; and 3) commercials are beginning to get too unrealistic i.e., Kool-aid commercial, cat singing, cookie man, etc.

Should we control the kind of advertising that is presented to our children? In what ways?

Approximately seventy percent of the respondents felt that advertising should have some type of controls, but the respondents were unsure how advertising should be controlled. Thirty percent of the respondents felt it was the job of the parent. Another thirty percent of the respondents felt that advertising did not need any type of controls because they saw nothing wrong with present advertisements.

Do you think that there are too many TV commercials aimed at our children?

Twenty-one percent of the mothers felt that there are too many commercials aimed directly at children. These respondents had no idea of what the correct number of advertisements should be, however. Almost eighty percent of the respondents were convinced that there are not that many TV commercials aimed at children, but too many commercials in general.

Do you think that TV commercials make kids want things? Is this good or bad?

All but one respondent felt that TV commercials make kids want things. The respondents were divided on how good or bad this is. Those parents that felt it was bad, based their belief on the fact that kids begin to want everything they see, without developing a sense of judgment on priorities and needs. Those respondents who felt it was good, wanted their children to have as much exposure to different situations as possible.

Do you think that TV commercials are understood by children? What are they trying to get the kids to do?

Thirty percent of the respondents felt that TV commercials are understood by children. Seventy percent felt that their children did not understand TV advertising. They felt that the children only saw the product in advertisements and did not understand the intent of the ad. All respondents felt that the intent of most advertisements was to get the children to ask their parents to buy the products advertised.

Do most commercials tell the truth about the products they are selling? Can you give some examples of those which do not?

Sixty percent of the respondents felt that commercials do tell the truth about the products they are selling while forty percent felt that ads are untruthful. The latter respondents based their belief on three basic observations: 1) products on TV exaggerate the performance capability of the products, i.e., toy products, nutritional cereals, etc.; 2) products on TV never fully explain that additional items or accessories are needed for certain products; i.e., toy products; and 3) products sell the hidden surprises rather than the product itself (premiums).

Do your children ask you for things they see advertised on TV? For example, what do they ask you for?

Eighty-six percent of the respondents revealed that their children ask for products seen on TV. In order of importance these products include: 1) toys, 2) candy, 3) cereal, 4) clothes, and 5) other food products. Thirteen percent of the respondents felt that their children did not ask for products seen on TV, basically because they are too young.

When you take your children shopping, what do they ask you to buy them? Why do you think they ask you for these things?

Respondents felt, in order of their importance, that items most commonly asked for when their children accompanied them shopping are: 1) toys, 2) candy, 3) clothes, and 4) other food products. The two main reasons that children asked for these products were 1) they saw the products on TV and 2) they saw the products in the store.

Where do your kids learn about the things that they want most?

Respondents felt, in order of importance, that kids learn about the things they want most from: 1) TV, 2) friends, 3) catalogs, 4) parents, and 5) school.

Do you think children get any wrong or bad ideas from the TV commercials (not programming) that they watch? For example?

One fourth of the respondents felt that children can get bad ideas from TV commercials. The respondents felt that the wrong ideas came from general commercials rather than childrens TV commercials. Bad ideas included sex appeal, drinking and smoking. The remaining three quarters of the respondents felt that children received no bad ideas from TV commercials.

The results of this exploratory research reveal that black mothers do not feel remarkably different about television advertising than white mothers. Black mothers do feel that their children understand advertising to some extent and that the advertising does influence the children to ask for the things they see advertised. The mothers also recognize that friends, school acquaintances, catalogs and the parents themselves influence what the children ask for. It seems that mothers of black children seem less concerned about the control of television advertising than has been reported in studies of white mothers. This study suggests that mothers are mothers and race is probably of little consequence. in attitudes toward advertising. This research as well as other research studies done among parents concerning advertising tends to validate the findings of Bauer and Greyser (1968) which contend that advertising is not that important to the American consumer when compared to topics like education, unions, bringing up the children, religion, shopping and the like.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

The secondary research reported in this paper, coupled with the exploratory findings of the survey, suggest that there is a continuing need for research into children's advertising and the impact of that advertising on minorities.

In part, the major reason is that so much of what is available, like most extensive research arenas, is conflicting. If public policy makers are to regulate children's television advertising effectively, they need more thorough knowledge of the subject.

There are several questions which must be answered in regard to children's television advertising and race:

1. What are the motivation themes of television advertising directed at childre.? What are the marketers asking children to do? Are the directions socially positive or negative?

2. What is the role of TV advertising in developing attitudes in minorities, reinforcing existing attitudes or changing attitudes?

3. How do the TV viewing habits of minorities differ from those of whites?

4. What is the role of the parent in the minority household vs. that in the majority household with respect to use of television as surrogate parents and as a punishment device?

5. What is the ability of minorities vs. whites to discriminate between programming and commercials?

6. What is the modeling behavior of minorities relative to whites? How rapidly does learning take place and what kinds of behavioral patterns are developed?

7. What is the overall impact of television advertising on minorities compared to that of whites?

These are just a few of the many complex questions which should be answered. The research which must be designed and implemented to answer these questions includes the need to:

1. Understand our research audience more fully. Wells (1965) noted that interviewing children is different than interviewing adults and we must better learn how to interview children. Albaum (1974) found that there is a relationship between the results we get from children and the places where we interview them. Children are not the typical sample units of consumer research. We must learn more about them and how they respond to questioning. This is particularly true with minority children.

2. Provide longitudinal data. It is difficult to ascertain the affect of advertising on adult responses not to mention children. But children could provide researchers with tremendous insights if we can develop some tracking studies and follow children through their various developmental stages to determine the importance of TV advertising in their lives. In these studies we must monitor the differential impact, if any, based on race.

3. Provide truly interdisciplinary research teams. These teams would include research experts in child development, advertising and marketing, child guidance and child regulatory agencies. In addition we need Black Doctor Spocks (TIME, July 28, 1975). Only in this way can we overcome the gap in communications among industry, consumers and regulators. A truly interdisciplinary team could enter the research environment in a much more objective manner than the parent with the 8-month old child, the ACT member, the ad manager for Kellogs and the academic primarily concerned with publishing.

4. Develop a Center for Research Into the Influence of Marketing and Child Development. This center would act as a disseminator of information much like the Center for Studies in the Adoption Process at the University of Michigan. We are at a point where hundreds of studies in children's advertising are being conducted. It is important that we build upon previous research and this necessitates a common point of dissemination.

We have started to answer some of the questions. The data bank is building up. The challenge now is to build that bank with solid, well-backed data rather than inflationary data provided by vested interests.

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